

# Chapter 1

## Overview



Sungsup Ra, Shanti Jagannathan, and Rupert Maclean

### Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
COVID-19	coronavirus disease
UIL	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

### 1.1 Introduction

The concept of *learning society* has been in circulation, in one form or another, for decades, supported by a wide range of stakeholders, including the international community. A learning society adopts a life cycle approach to knowledge. The learning society philosophy considers learning as a continuum that takes place well beyond the early stages of school, secondary, and postsecondary education, and in formal and informal settings outside institutions. Learning can thus take place

---

S. Ra (✉)

Human and Social Development Division, South Asia Department and Education Sector Group,  
Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines  
e-mail: [sungsupra@adb.org](mailto:sungsupra@adb.org)

S. Jagannathan

Education Sector Group, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department, Asian  
Development Bank, Manila, Philippines  
e-mail: [sjagannathan@adb.org](mailto:sjagannathan@adb.org)

R. Maclean

School of Education, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia  
e-mail: [rupert.maclean@utas.edu.au](mailto:rupert.maclean@utas.edu.au)

School of Education, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

© The Author(s) 2021

S. Ra et al. (eds.), *Powering a Learning Society During an Age of Disruption*,  
Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects 58,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0983-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0983-1_1)

anytime and anywhere through many channels of the economy and society. Yet, new dimensions keep emerging, and there is an active discourse on how to engage and empower key partners to promote a *culture of learning* that supports and motivates individuals and organizations to learn on a community-wide and society-wide basis.

Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald have argued that creating a learning society should be one of the major objectives of economic policy (Stiglitz and Greenwald 2014). If a learning society is created, a more productive economy will emerge and standards of living will increase. They explore the concept of going beyond learning by doing to learning to learn by learning and the transformation from a learning economy to creating a learning society.

There are two domains for learning: *learning for life* (mainly referring to learning in support of people becoming well-functioning, effective members of a family and wider communities); and *learning for work* (referring to skills development for employability). Both are important aspects of a learning society and involve a need for dynamic change over time as societies and economies adapt to and meet emerging challenges. For example, with regard to skills development for employability and learning for work, emerging labor markets of the future require re-imagining skills development and training (Ra et al. 2019).

Learning is a different concept from that of education (Field 2005). A key aspect is people's engagement in a wider social context, which is an important distinction between the two. Learning—the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values—is a natural everyday process that occurs throughout life (Faris 2005, p. 26). Learning covers activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults, older people) in all life-wide contexts (workplaces and businesses, schools, families, and broader communities).

Education and human capital development, and advances in educational attainment, have been at the heart of the process of growth and socioeconomic development. Hanushek and Woessmann (2015) show that cross-country differences in long-run growth rates can be explained by differences in cognitive skills, as measured by standardized test scores in mathematics and science. In another study, Hanushek and Woessmann (2016) argued that the development status of countries in Latin America and Asia could be almost completely explained by differences in the test scores of schoolchildren. Further, this relationship between cognitive skills and economic growth is significantly greater among low-income countries than high-income ones.

The benefits of learning go far beyond increases in per capita gross domestic product. Learning is associated with a wide range of benefits—from better health to better governance. Learning helps people achieve their full potential as citizens, leaders, workers, and entrepreneurs.

## 1.2 Structure of the Book

This book is a compendium of articles from leading experts who discuss, from different vantage points, the importance of *powering a learning society during an age of disruption*. The publication seeks to capture important issues and trends, and to provide directions for how learning societies and lifelong learning can be best promoted.

The book identifies and analyzes trends and future directions with particular reference to selected examples from the Asia and Pacific region. The United Nations (UN) describes this region as exceedingly diverse, ranging from small island developing states to large global economies (UN 2019; UN Population Division 2019). The book spotlights examples from member countries of the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The chapters take stock of major global trends and developments and how they provide a new impetus to re-imagining the role of learning societies. It also provides some case studies of the situation in specific countries. They examine and take into account unprecedented disruptions caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and address key response mechanisms that would enable education systems to “build back better” and envision a “new normal” in education and training. The chapters outline new directions for learning societies resulting from experiences generated by COVID-19 and other major disrupters. While showcasing opportunities and potential gains, the chapters also capture significant barriers that must be overcome to achieve the vision of a new normal.

The book contains think pieces from experienced, leading academics and practitioners. It brings together a range of stakeholders—heads of professional organizations, private sector representatives, business leaders, leaders in civil society promoting education in society, university leaders, education companies, equity investors, leaders of large government-led skills initiatives and representatives of international development organizations—to weigh in on future directions for learning societies. These experts have contributed articles that can help chart possible paradigm shifts to increase returns from education and training in future learning societies. These articles are written as think pieces to stimulate change and development rather than as academic pieces.

The 21 chapters are organized into six parts. In Part I: Introduction, the first chapter provides an overview of key issues and sets the overall context for the subsequent chapters. It addresses the concerns, and prospects for education and training and the challenges faced by countries for effective policy and practice to foster learning societies. Chapter 2 discusses the conceptual framework for the approach adopted in this volume by elaborating on the meaning of “learning society”, along with key issues and concerns in the current age of disruption, with particular reference to the COVID-19 health pandemic.

Approaches to developing learnability during an age of disruption, and issues concerning the learning crisis, are examined in Part II: Learnability and the Learning Crisis. The four chapters in this part examine possible ways of effectively addressing

the syndrome of the learning deficit with regard to basic and 21st century skills (Chapter 3); and the importance of adopting robust approaches to assessment for improving student learning, by reassessing various global approaches to student assessment, especially in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 4). This is followed by Chapter 5, which provides an overview on disrupted and ruptured school-centered education systems, the so-called new normal in light of the pandemic, and the importance of lifelong learning and learning societies when seeking to achieve a utopian learning society. Chapter 6 makes an assessment of what works best as an effective approach to teacher quality and effectiveness, by providing a case study of achieving resilience and growth through the initiatives of a nonprofit organization, Teach for the Philippines, whose objective is to provide all Filipino children with access to inclusive, relevant, and excellent education.

Part III: Future-Proofing Postbasic Education explores how to strengthen and upgrade learning societies and lifelong learning to effectively develop specialist foundation skills in postbasic education. A case study is provided in Chapter 7 of a university's response in Singapore for future-proofing its graduates, and careers to achieve resilience and growth. Chapter 8, provides insights from the European Union concerning intensifying skills development for new-age economic development. Another case study is presented in Chapter 9 on how quality assurance for online learning, at scale, is being aimed for at the Institute of Cyber Education in Indonesia, which has contributed to increasing higher education participation rates. Meanwhile, the increasing reliance on technology that has fostered certification and accreditation innovations in technical and vocational education and training through increased online learning is examined in Chapter 10.

Part IV: Communities as Learning Platforms explores how communities can and do play an important role in promoting a learning society. Topics examined in this section are the convergence of education and city planning to promote playful learning landscapes, by merging architectural design and placemaking with the science of learning to address inequity in learning (Chapter 11); effective approaches to advancing learning cities through lifelong learning and the creation of a learning society (Chapter 12); lessons from India concerning the role of citizen reports and communities in improving children's learning in support of learning for all (Chapter 13); and roles of the public and private sectors in Singapore in developing a learning society that helps individuals acquire new skills and offers opportunities for upskilling and reskilling to support growing sectors of the economy (Chapter 14).

Strengthening and upgrading effective workplace learning is important as countries promote learning societies and lifelong learning, particularly in order to address emerging demands in light of the fourth industrial revolution or Industry 4.0. Part V: Learning Societies and Industry 4.0 examines how a learning society could meet the needs of Industry 4.0. Chapter 15 proposes new directions for apprenticeships to support and promote a learning society and lifelong learning. Chapter 16 discusses effective ways of facilitating data-driven workforce planning for productivity increases in support of learning societies, using the rail sector as an example. Chapter 17 explores the experience of the Skillman Network in

promoting workplace-based training in the European Union. Chapter 18 rounds up this part by propounding insights from the Republic of Korea on how to strike a suitable work and learning balance post-COVID-19.

Part VI: Technology Solutions to Build a Learning Society concludes the book by examining technology-based solutions to transform and support learning societies. The concept of a modern learning society as exemplified in Coursera's post-pandemic workforce recovery initiatives is presented in Chapter 19, wherein the need to promote reskilling to rebuild and support workforce recovery, in partnership with governments and workforce intermediaries across the globe, can provide access to no-cost digital upskilling to displaced workers. Chapter 20 emphasizes the important role of the private sector and technology for future-ready education and training, while Chapter 21 explains how data and digital technologies can benefit and help transform education systems.

### 1.3 Roles of a Learning Society

An effective learning society seeks to enhance and promote *learning for all*, contributing to individual and community development and social cohesion, lifelong learning, irrespective of age, gender, race, and socioeconomic or work status, through multiple modalities. Diverse actors need to play a part in promoting a learning society: public sector, private sector and nongovernment organizations, and local communities and interest groups, all of which provide genuine, effective opportunities for enhanced learning, creativity, and innovation.

Assuring quality and relevance in education, along with promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, are key global education goals in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2015). In a learning society, individuals, as well as organizations and institutions, adopt a learning approach to respond to the emerging needs of societies and economies.

In times of rapid change, unpredictability, and disruptive technologies, there is an even stronger need to strengthen a true “learning society approach” that is adaptive and flexible. Technology is not only changing landscapes concerning the organization of economic activities and business operations; it is also influencing the very nature and style by which education and training are provided, particularly keeping in mind the learning style of the millennials (or the digital natives, as they are often referred to).

To be adaptive to the future, learning societies need to enable skills to navigate the dynamics of the fourth industrial revolution, the rise of online learning, the emergence of new technical domains, and the aging of societies that requires people to stay active in the workforce much longer than before. Recent challenges posed by COVID-19 have also revealed the importance of agility and multiple channels for providing education and training for learning continuity. As economies return to more regular operations after COVID-19 has been controlled, the expectation is that there

will be a “new normal” with transformative features that are resilient to possible future shocks. The role of parents, communities, civil service organizations, and local bodies has thus, once again, emerged as an important requirement in providing learning continuity.

### ***1.3.1 Framework for “Learning to Learn”***

A learning society ensures that learning can take place in all areas of the society and economy, with learning links supporting and reinforcing each other.

When people learn *how* to learn, not just *what* to learn, they are better able to identify their own learning needs and direct their own learning pathways. They become personally empowered. To adopt *learning to learn*, they need to be able to find and appraise information and to think critically to solve problems. Individuals possessing these learning competencies are the key building blocks of learning societies.

The school system is crucial to providing a firm and reliable foundation for learning to learn and in nurturing young people to develop learning competencies that can adapt to different circumstances and styles. Unfortunately however, many traditional school systems still do not currently teach and nurture “learning to learn” skills. This needs to be corrected since this foundation at the school level enables students to make progress as “learning individuals” through higher tiers of learning, and to become self-driven and independent learners. Some will progress to tertiary education, where they develop further skills; some will pursue vocational skills for specific occupations; and some will go on to research and teaching in other communities to help drive positive change in society. When people enter the workforce—whether this be the formal or informal sectors—the worksite offers another avenue for continued learning. Learning can and should take place in homes and in communities throughout life. A strong in-built culture of learning makes organizations “learning institutions” that continually adapt and improve.

Learnability, or learning to learn, is a critical feature of ensuring that learners in schools, training institutions, universities and the broader society become capable of keeping pace with change, adapting to emerging needs of the economy and society, and navigating their lives in the most productive manner.

Measuring and monitoring learning in different settings and systems that can effectively provide the materials and support to lifelong learning are key to the success of a learning society.

### ***1.3.2 The Learning Society in an Age of Disruption***

Because of the far-reaching impact of COVID-19 on countries in Asia and the Pacific, ADB has prepared a guidance note that reimagines education and training after

COVID-19 (ADB 2021). The guidance note presents an initial set of issues and suggestions to assist, in particular, ADB member countries in coping with COVID-19 disruptions, and shaping new pathways for education.

ADB is currently an alliance of 68 members, 49 from within Asia and the Pacific and 19 outside this region, comprising 5 billion (66%) of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> The large and diverse Asia and Pacific region is adapting to global economic changes, including changes associated with the fourth industrial revolution, and now COVID-19 (Charungkaittikul 2020).

There is no doubt that the long-term impact of COVID-19, on top of other disruptions, will be dramatic. Magnuson (2020) notes the future will be much more precarious if we do not focus on building systems for lifelong learning that safeguard quality and inclusiveness. There seems to be a hunger for international dialogue within and between communities about learning societies, learning cities, and learning communities, and their response to COVID-19. The UNESCO cities of Wyndham and Melton in Victoria, Australia, for example, in partnership with a number of other learning cities, held a successful online Global Learning Festival<sup>2</sup> in September 2020, to celebrate learning and to bring their citizens some joy and connection in these trying times during the COVID-19 health pandemic.

In an age of disruption, it is timely to revisit the characteristics of a learning society (see Box 1.1).

### Box 1.1 What Is a Learning Society?

A learning society effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to

- promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education,
- revitalize learning in families and communities,
- facilitate learning for and in the workplace,
- extend the use of modern learning technologies,
- enhance quality and excellence in learning, and
- foster a culture of learning throughout life.

In so doing, it will create and reinforce individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development.

*Source* UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. 2013. Key features of learning cities. <http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/key-features-learning-cities>. Accessed 3 February 2020.

Lifelong learning is embedded in the integration of learning and living. Field (2005) argues that people's social relationships play an important part in their capacity to learn. Lifelong learning is not just another phase of adult education. The move toward a learning society recognizes the interconnectedness of formal,

<sup>1</sup>For full details on developing member countries of ADB, see ADB. How we're organized. <https://www.adb.org/who-we-are/organization>.

<sup>2</sup>Global Learning Festival. 2020.[www.globallearningfestival.com](http://www.globallearningfestival.com).

nonformal, and informal learning. As with the formal curriculum of schools, universities, technical and vocational education and training institutions, and community education agencies, there is a vital need to form effective partnerships with actors in the public, private, corporate business, and voluntary sectors in order to adapt and be responsive to change. Indeed, such partnerships that work toward common goals, especially on complex issues such as climate change, can have transformative educational and social outcomes (Rathzel and Uzzell 2009; Wheeler et al. 2018).

In line with *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* (UNESCO 2015), at the heart of a learning society are the principles of inclusion and equity, that is, equal access to all levels of education and learning opportunities for the vulnerable. This includes persons with disabilities, minorities, indigenous people, and children, youth, and adults in vulnerable situations. Indeed, learning should be inclusive, relevant, of high quality, and offer a variety of modalities (formal, nonformal, and informal), which together meet a wide range of learning needs. This includes pathways to vocational and higher education, quality assurance, the use of learning technologies, social and other forms of media, and the building and celebration of a learning culture.

## 1.4 Key Messages of the Book

As UNESCO UIL (2015) stresses, the measurement, evaluation, and planning of learning society approaches, whether this is at the neighborhood, designated community, city, or regional level is imperative.

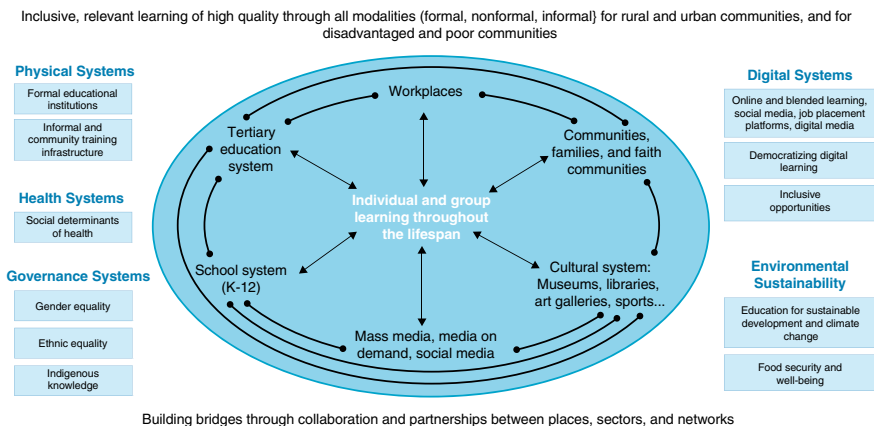
Figure 1.1 illustrates, in summary diagrammatical form, the main features of learning societies, and the interrelationship between various dimensions in an age of disruption, as presented and discussed in this book. A learning society occurs within the overall context of political systems (formal educational institutions, informal and community training infrastructure); health systems (social determinants of health); governance systems (gender equality, ethnic equality, indigenous knowledge); digital systems (online and blended learning, social media, job placement platforms, digital media, democratizing digital learning with inclusive opportunities); and environmental sustainability (education for sustainable development and climate change, food security and well-being).

From an exploration of the key issues concerning economic, social, environmental, and health-related disruptors in a learning society, what are the key messages of this book?

Following are the important messages that emerge from the various chapters in this book:

- (i) ***In an “age of major disruption”, an effective learning society can help economies, societies, and individuals to successfully navigate transformational changes and build resilience and greater productivity.***





**Fig. 1.1** A learning society in an age of disruption (A *learning society* is one where inclusive, relevant learning of a high quality occurs through all modalities—formal, nonformal, and informal—for all communities, both rural and urban, including for disadvantaged and poor communities). Note K-12 = kindergarten to grade 12, Source UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2013. Key features of learning cities. <http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/key-features-learning-cities>. Accessed 3 February 2020

The disruptions may arise from various sources such as Industry 4.0 with its widespread technological changes; climate change and climate-related global events; and global health pandemics such as COVID-19. On the one hand, these disruptions can greatly impact education and training. On the other hand, a learning society can help to amplify the positive impact of disruptions and mitigate the negative impact.

- (ii) ***There is a need to re-examine and reevaluate the structure, characteristics, content, and modalities of education and training.*** From kindergarten to grade 12, all the way to postsecondary levels, training and education can be made more agile, responsive, and inclusive in fundamental ways. Institutions need to renew their commitment to achieve a learning society for all, and to promote lifelong learning for all.
- (iii) ***“Re-engineering education for change” is required.*** Rather than just tinkering with or making minor adjustments to existing systems of education and training, the re-engineering concept places education and educators at the leading edge of the development process whereby systems and processes need become more nimble and agile to serve changing societies and economies.
- (iv) ***Constructing an effective learning society should be considered in the context of solving societal challenges.*** These challenges include environmental degradation, the need for greening of economies and societies, combating climate change, reducing major inequalities, and providing opportunities to all to acquire skills and quality jobs for decent living.

- (v) ***Resources outside schools and educational institutions need to be harnessed for a sustainable learning society.*** COVID-19 has highlighted that a less rigid curriculum, and flexible teaching practices and assessment systems are crucial to move with the changing times. Learning opportunities in the home–neighborhood–community continuum need to be strengthened.
- (vi) ***Education and training institutions need to collaborate and consult with other stakeholders for a successful learning society.*** These stakeholders include parents, employers, civic authorities, and other agencies. Pursuit of networks of excellence in education training uplifts the quality of human capital and also helps to build talent of the highest order in important sectors and themes.
- (vii) ***Governments need to promote a culture of learning where continuous and lifelong learning are promoted.*** In the context of rapid changes and uncertainty of future markets and societies, it will be even more critical to promote learning how to learn. Learnability or “learning agility” to develop and build new skills will be a crucial attribute in a learning society.

## References

- Asian Development Bank (ADB). How we're organized. <https://www.adb.org/who-we-are/organization>.
- ADB. 2021. *COVID-19 and education in Asia and the Pacific: Guidance note*. Manila.
- Charungkaittikul, S. 2020. Lifelong learning in Asia and the Pacific: Policy implications. Paper presented in the Adult Education in Global Times: An International Research Conference. Vancouver: University of British Columbia. [https://edst-educ.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/06/aegt\\_proceedings\\_upload.pdf](https://edst-educ.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/06/aegt_proceedings_upload.pdf).
- Faris, R. 2005. Lifelong learning, social capital and place management. In *Rebalancing the social and economic, learning, partnership and place*, ed. C. Duke, M. Osborne, and B. Wilson, 16–36. Leicester: NIACE.
- Field, J. 2005. *Social capital and lifelong learning*. Bristol: The Policy Press, University of Bristol.
- Global Learning Festival. 2020. [www.globallearningfestival.com](http://www.globallearningfestival.com).
- Hanushek, E., and L. Woessmann. 2015. *Knowledge capital of nations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hanushek, E., and L. Woessmann. 2016. Knowledge capital, growth, and the East Asian miracle. *Science* 351 (6271): 344–345. <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/knowledge-capital-growth-and-east-asian-miracle>.
- Magnuson, P. 2020. COVID-19: Building a sustainable and just future for all. <https://thelifelonglearningblog.uil.unesco.org/2020/05/22/covid-19-building-a-sustainable-and-just-future-for-all/#more-736>.
- Ra, S., S. Jagannathan, and R. Maclean. 2019. Emerging labor markets of the future—Re-imagining skills development and training. *International Journal of Training Research* 17 (S1): 1–181.
- Rathzel, N., and D. Uzzell. 2009. Transformative environmental education: A collective rehearsal for reality. *Environmental Education Research* 15 (3): 263–277.
- Stiglitz, J., and B. Greenwald. 2014. *Creating a learning society. A New Approach to Growth, Development and Social Progress*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- United Nations (UN). 2019. The future of Asian and Pacific cities: Transformative pathways towards sustainable urban development. Bangkok: United Nations. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Future%20of%20AP%20Cities%20Report%202019\\_0.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Future%20of%20AP%20Cities%20Report%202019_0.pdf).

- UN Population Division. 2019. The 2019 revision of world population prospects. <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.
- UNESCO. 2015. Education 2030, Incheon Declaration: Towards inclusive and quality education and lifelong learning for all. <https://iite.unesco.org/publications/education-2030-incheon-declaration-framework-action-towards-inclusive-equitable-quality-education-lifelong-learning/>.
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). 2013. Key features of learning cities. <http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/key-features-learning-cities>. Accessed 3 February 2020.
- Wheeler, L., J.R. Guevara, and J.A. Smith. 2018. School–Community learning partnerships for sustainability: Recommended best practice and reality. *International Review of Education* 64 (3): 313–337.

The opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asian Development Bank, its Board of Directors, or the countries they represent.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 IGO license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/igo/>) which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the Asian Development Bank, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

Any dispute related to the use of the works of the Asian Development Bank that cannot be settled amicably shall be submitted to arbitration pursuant to the UNCITRAL rules. The use of the Asian Development Bank's name for any purpose other than for attribution, and the use of the Asian Development Bank's logo, shall be subject to a separate written license agreement between the Asian Development Bank and the user and is not authorized as part of this CC-IGO license. Note that the link provided above includes additional terms and conditions of the license.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

